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Saudi Arabia Tortured a U.S. Citizen, His Son Tells Congress



Dr. Walid Fitaihi, a Harvard-trained doctor, hospital owner and motivational speaker, in

By David D. Kirkpatrick

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LONDON — Ahmad Fitaihi had waited more than a year for Saudi Arabia to release his father, a Harvard-trained doctor and a dual Saudi and American citizen who had been imprisoned without any charges or trial.

The Saudi government had stripped Mr. Fitaihi's mother and six siblings of their American passports, barred them from leaving the kingdom and frozen their assets, he said in an interview. And during a temporary release for a son's surgery, the father, Walid Fitaihi, told a friend and a family member that he had endured a torture session, including electrical shocks and whipping.

So last month, Ahmad Fitaihi, 26, turned to Washington, where his efforts to lobby Congress about his father's case are adding new resistance to the Trump administration's efforts to restabilize relations with Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia was already struggling to move past a bipartisan backlash from Congress over the killing of the dissident Jamal Khashoggi, an American resident and Washington Post columnist who was ambushed and dismembered last fall by Saudi agents in a consulate in Istanbul.

Now Mr. Fitaihi's appeals have prompted a new wave of bipartisan criticism of the kingdom. The Democratic chairman and ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee have issued an unusual joint statement condemning the treatment of Dr. Fitaihi and demanding his release.

During a confirmation hearing last week for the retired general John Abizaid, President Trump's nominee for ambassador to Riyadh, senators from both parties raised Dr. Fitaihi's case repeatedly. Senator Marco Rubio,

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Republican of Florida, charged that the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, had “gone full gangster.”

Mr. Fitaihi is expected to appear publicly on Thursday for the first time to talk about the allegations of torture at a news conference with Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Saudi officials have denied any mistreatment of detainees. A spokesman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington did not respond to other questions about the treatment of Dr. Fitaihi and his family.

Mr. Fitaihi is in some ways well suited to appeal to an American audience on behalf of his father. He was born in Boston, lived there until age 10, returned for college at the University of Miami, and lives in Los Angeles. Although his family now lives in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, Mr. Fitaihi has spent more of his life in the United States.

“One hundred percent, yeah, man, America First, bro,” he said in a telephone interview from the Washington area.

His father, Dr. Fitaihi, 54, had founded a private hospital in Jidda and became a well-known motivational speaker. He was among more than 200 wealthy Saudis arrested in November 2017 in a roundup that was portrayed as a crackdown on corruption. But Mr. Fitaihi said his father had told the family he did not know of any allegations or evidence against him.

“There is no reason whatsoever,” the son said.

Most of the others detained at the same time as Dr. Fitaihi have since been released. But his son said the former detainees and their families are afraid to talk to one another, and his family believes the government has warned them to avoid contact with one another as a condition of their release.

“Everybody is in a bubble,” he said.

Mr. Fitaihi said he had been visiting his father’s medical office in Jidda

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when a group of plainclothes security officers came for the doctor. The son said he received special permission from the Saudi authorities to leave the kingdom last year in order to look after the family's assets abroad, since their wealth inside the kingdom had been frozen.

Much of the information that the family has learned about Dr. Fitaihi since his arrest — including the account of his torture — came from a few days in January 2018 when he was allowed out of prison to visit a son in a hospital after surgery. Dr. Fitaihi “was half his size and very emotional,” Mr. Fitaihi said.

The family initially hoped that the Saudi authorities would quickly release Dr. Fitaihi on their own, or that quiet appeals behind the scenes would secure his release.

But the more recent appeals to the State Department and Congress appeared to yield some improvement, the son said. Dr. Fitaihi had previously been allowed only two visits from American consular officials, and only after a full year in prison, but in the last five weeks Dr. Fitaihi has been allowed three more visits — all closely monitored, Mr. Fitaihi said.

“Now he has a bit bigger cell and some exercise time,” Mr. Fitaihi said.

There have also been surprises.

About two weeks ago, Mr. Fitaihi said, his family was surprised to see Dr. Fitaihi at the door to their home. He had been dragged there in leg shackles by a group of soldiers armed with automatic rifles, and they ordered him to locate every computerized device inside the house.

“He told them, ‘I don’t even remember, I haven’t been here for more than a year,’” his son said.

Dr. Fitaihi’s wife and children watched in tears.

The search was unusual because it occurred more than a year after the arrest, and the soldiers could have combed the places just as effectively

without Dr. Fitaihi. His son said the family believed it was intended primarily to scare them out of continuing to lobby in Washington.

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